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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000558

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN MURR AND LAF KAHWAJI UNWORRIED
ABOUT ELECTION IMPACT ON LAF

REF: BEIRUT 00489

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In separate meetings with visiting U.S. Special Operations Commander Admiral Eric Olson and the Ambassador, Defense Minister Elias Murr and LAF Commander Jean Kahwaji expressed appreciation for U.S. military aid to Lebanon, calling it crucial to the continued improvement of Lebanon's armed forces and Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Both men focused on the importance of Lebanon's special forces to the overall performance of the LAF. Murr and Kahwaji were unconcerned with the upcoming June 7 parliamentary elections, assessing the resulting government would be divided almost evenly and, therefore, would be unable to change current policies, especially regarding the LAF. Kahwaji detailed his May 12 meeting with visiting Syrian Army Chief of Staff General Ali Habib, focusing on border issues and noting that Habib promised to turn over to the Lebanese the suspect in last month's attack on an LAF patrol in the Bekaa. Murr and Kahwaji both intend to travel to the United States soon.

2. (C) Participants in the meetings included Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Michael Vickers, PolMil Advisor Ambassador Roger Pierce, DATT and PoleconOff. End summary.

SPECIAL FORCES KEY

3. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr, in a May 18 meeting with visiting SOCOM Admiral Eric Olson and the Ambassador, focused on the role of Lebanon's Special Forces Operations (SOF) as the linchpin of the LAF. The SOF provided critical expertise and improved overall morale, Murr said, and he thanked the U.S. for its strong support. The LAF, as Lebanon's "one truly national institution," provided security to the country, but the special forces were required for "special tasks," he said. Although the LAF faced difficulties recruiting soldiers for regular forces, Murr said finding

recruits for the special forces never presented a problem.

¶4. (C) The special forces units, although under-equipped, Murr continued, had performed superbly during the 2007 battle against Fatah al-Islam extremists in the Nahr al Barid Palestinian camp. Murr credited their good training, mostly provided by the U.S., for the success. Murr noted that, with other dangerous Palestinian locations in Lebanon -- he mentioned Sidon's Ain el Hilweh refugee camp and two Palestinian military bases in the Bekaa (Qousaya and Hilwe) -- take-aways from the Nahr al Barid fight would likely be applicable in the future. Admiral Olson expressed willingness to work with Minister Murr and LAF Commander Jean Kahwaji on a "lessons learned" from the Nahr al Barid exercise.

¶5. (C) Admiral Olson stressed the importance the U.S. places on its cooperation with Lebanese special forces and said he expected training to continue and to increase in the upcoming year (there are at present five JCETs annually with the LAF). Murr opined that U.S. aid to Lebanon was following the "best track" possible, providing a combination of training and equipment. Responding to a question by Murr, Olson said he was impressed by the individual skills of Lebanese special forces soldiers but noted that, as with all soldiers, continued training was necessary to improve cohesion among the soldiers and units. Murr agreed with this assessment and expressed gratitude for U.S. training to improve LAF unity.

¶6. (C) LAF Commander General Kahwaji, in a separate May 18 meeting with Admiral Olson, also assessed that U.S.-Lebanese

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training was going well. Describing special forces cooperation as especially good, Kahwaji noted that he planned to increase Lebanon's special forces capacity from three to five battalions. Kahwaji reported the LAF did not/not face operational constraints due to cabinet's inability to pass the 2009 budget, but he noted that expanding the force would be more difficult.

NO CONCERNS ABOUT
ELECTIONS

¶7. (C) Murr noted recent momentum on building the credibility of the LAF -- boosted by his and LAF Commander Kahwaji's visits to the U.S. -- should continue regardless of the June 7 elections results. Even if the March 14 coalition lost, it would lose by only "one percent," Murr assessed, and the coalition would still comprise about half of the cabinet and half of the parliament -- significantly more than a blocking third needed to enforce the moderate March 14 coalition's will. This safety net, however, was unnecessary as March 14 would win the majority, in Murr's opinion. General Kahwaji, echoing Murr's assessment, said that because of inherent checks and balances, Lebanese policy could not change quickly, even if the opposition were to win the June 7 elections.

¶8. (C) Describing the opposition's strategy as to "win elections or win by arms," Murr said he was pleased to face (Hizballah) opponents with such different and "Iranian" values. He described the Hizballah-led opposition as cowards who were unwilling to face their opponents in a true debate. As the only civilian in Lebanon's Ministry of Defense (MOD) but whose "heart was with the army," Murr said he worked to ensure that Lebanese policy decisions supported the army. The opposition would continue to work to remove him, the "bete noire," by any means possible, before or after the elections, Murr opined.

¶9. (C) Murr downplayed rumors that Hizballah could influence the army during election season. He credited his recruitment of 20,000 new soldiers -- none Shia, he said -- for decreasing the total number of Shia soldiers in the LAF from

88 percent to 23 percent. The LAF officer corps, mainly Christian, maintained the "Christian face" of the army, he said.

¶10. (C) Murr expressed confidence in the LAF's ability to maintain security on election day and beyond. No soldier could accept armed militias as a counterweight to the official army, he argued, and soldiers would work to prevent the buildup of such militias. Murr also noted that the LAF was in capable hands under the leadership of General Kahwaji, who Murr described as a "real soldier" who "comes from the ground," referring to Kahwaji's long career in the LAF. President Michel Sleiman, whose "heart, mind, and values" were still in the LAF, was also a stalwart ally, he emphasized.

POSITIVE MEETING
WITH SYRIAN MILITARY

¶11. (C) Kahwaji described his May 12 meeting with visiting Syrian Army Chief of Staff Ali Habib -- the first trip to Lebanon by a senior Syrian military delegation since the Syrian withdrawal in 2005 -- as "very good," noting that Habib emphasized that the Syrian-Lebanese relationship would be conducted only through official institutions. The two discussed border cooperation and agreed to exchange information regarding terrorists crossing over the shared border. Habib confirmed that Ali Jaafar, the key suspect in an attack last month against an LAF patrol (reftel), was in Syrian custody. The Syrians were still looking for three other suspects to return to Lebanese authorities along with

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Jaafar, Habib said, but would turn over Jaafar on his own if the search for the other three proved unsuccessful. Additionally, Habib offered Syrian assistance in helping the LAF repair its aging T-54 and T-55 tanks. The formation of a Lebanese Common Border Force -- that would combine currently separate border security mandates of the Lebanese army, police, immigration, and customs -- would take time, Kahwaji noted.

SEEKING KUWAITI AID

¶12. (C) Kahwaji, who plans to travel to the U.S. in June at the invitation of CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus, told the Ambassador and Admiral Olson he would first visit Kuwait. He planned to ask the Kuwaitis to help build a new military hospital in Lebanon and said he had received positive signals from the Kuwaitis about their interest in the project. On other military aid, Kahwaji said the UAE was ready to give Lebanon its promised ten PUMA transport helicopters.

¶13. (C) Describing the delay of a shipment of German-produced Leopards from Belgium, Kahwaji noted the Belgians had acted too quickly, offering the equipment to Lebanon before clearing the idea of the third-party transfer with the Germans. The Germans were "embarrassed" by the contract between Lebanon and Belgium that had been signed without their knowledge, Kahwaji opined. He did not expect that the German parliament -- where the issue is currently on hold -- would discuss the transfer of the Leopards but said he was in contact with the German embassy "daily" on the topic.

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